

PAPER
1

PAST AND PRESENT EXCAVATIONS OF A MULTI-PERIOD SITE

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BACKGROUND TO THE CURRENT EXCAVATION PROJECT [AB]

Location of site

The remains of the Żejtun Roman Villa lie on the highest point of a long, somewhat flat ridge that stretches for about 1 km roughly in an east-west direction (Fig. 1). This point is located close to the east end of the ridge. Beyond Dun Lawrenz Degabriele Street that borders the Girls Secondary School grounds on the east side, this ridge starts dipping rather rapidly towards Tas-Silġ and Delimara, along the road leading to those destinations. The ridge dips slightly less rapidly to the north, beyond Luqa Briffa Street, even less rapidly to the south, beyond the Żejtun Bypass (Anton Buttigieg Street) while it maintains more or less the same altitude to the west up to Bir id-Deheb from where the ground starts rising again towards Gudja and the parish church of Hal Ghaxaq. The ground level of the Villa remains, therefore, is a couple of metres higher than that of the old parish church of Santa Katerina (the present St Gregory's church) and considerably higher than that of the present Żejtun parish church (Fig. 2a).

The purpose of these observations is to take into account the possible reasons for the choice of the location of the villa. One should keep in mind, however, other possible reasons and constraints that might

have determined that same choice, such as the land ownership (which we shall never be able to verify for lack of contemporary archival documentation), the presence of water resources, and possible pre-existing agricultural structures.

Indeed, we now know for certain, from findings from recent excavations, that the Roman villa was preceded by a Punic establishment (see below, and Anastasi, this volume). As to water resources, whereas the presence of at least one large cistern (and a system of rock-cut channels leading to it) on the southern flank of the building suggests that rain water runoff from the footprint of the building was stored and exploited, a deep cylindrical rock-cut feature near the industrial part of the villa might, in fact, be a well (a *spiera*) dug in order to trap and exploit fresh water seeping from a localized water table which no longer exists. Evidence for a similar localized water table in the past was discovered at Tas-Silġ in the form of a deep well lined with interlocking slabs on all four sides (Bonanno 2009: 27, fig. 4; Vella *et al.*: forthcoming). But for this to be verified, this rock-cut feature needs to be explored further.

Before the discovery

No physical remains of an ancient structure had ever been identified in the area before 1961; at least no such finds had ever been documented, neither in the official reports of the central

archaeological authorities (the Museum Annual Reports) nor in the writings of antiquarian writers, both national (like Gian Francesco Abela and A.A. Caruana) or local (like E.B. Vella, Fr. John Farrugia and Walter Zahra). The only indication of a connection with olive cultivation and olive oil extraction came from the place name of the village. It is important to keep well in mind, however, that this place name does not reach beyond the Arab occupation of Malta as from AD 870 and might not, in fact, be connected with the corresponding activity in antiquity. Indeed, according to the present authority on Maltese place names (Wettinger 2000: 630-31), the Arabic name Žejtun could be the name (or nickname) of a person, or a land mark determined by the presence of a few olive trees in an otherwise bare landscape, deprived of any other trees. The possibility, however, remains that on their arrival in this part of the island, the Arabs came across substantial remains of an olive pressing establishment that was still active in the immediately preceding decades, that is, the last years of the Byzantine domination. Again, this can only be established by the current excavations, or by the discovery of some other similar remains elsewhere in the Žejtun area.

Nevertheless, even if no structural remains had been reported, with the benefit of hindsight we can say that other archaeological features had been discovered in the surroundings, namely, subterranean rock-cut tombs of the Classical era (that is, Punic and Roman), that indicated that some sort of settlement must have existed in the area in antiquity. Such tombs had been discovered in different parts of Žejtun, such as at the bottom of St Catherine Street (MAR 1912-13: 6) and St Clement Street (MAR 1911-12: 3) - and beyond, the most interesting of which was the complex on the Tal-Barrani Road, which provided evidence for a radical restructuring in the late 7th

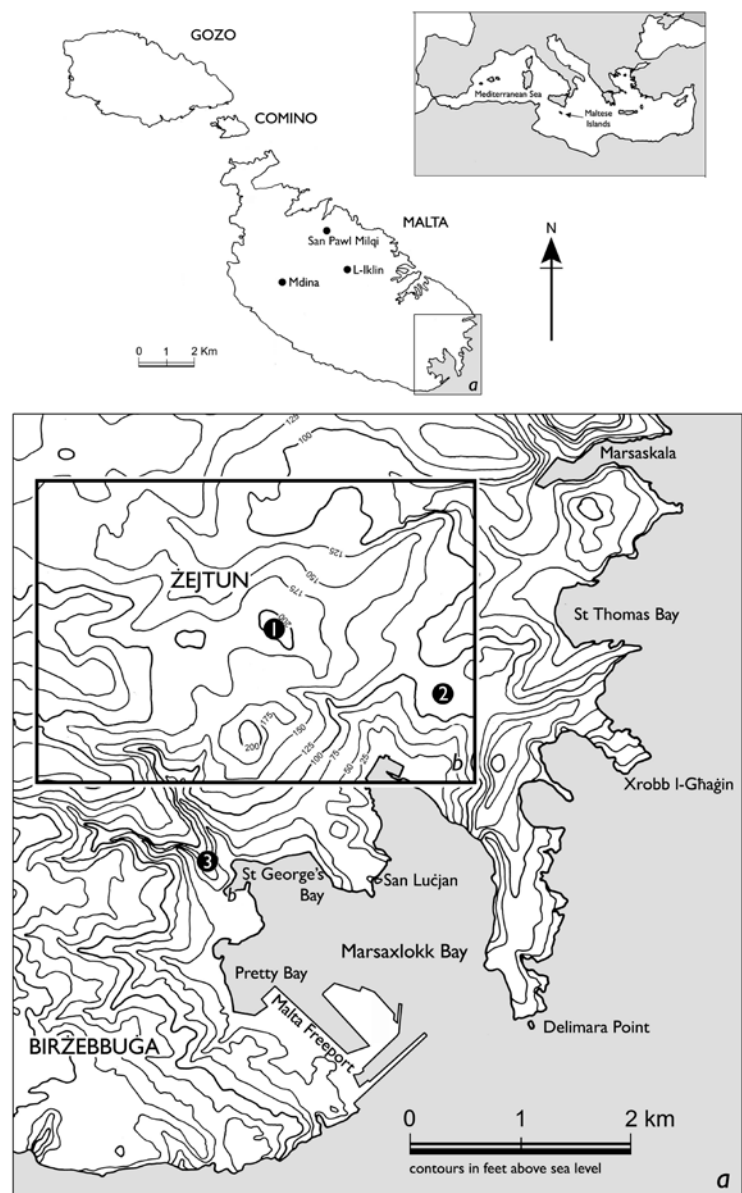


Figure 1. Site location map of the Žejtun Roman Villa. Inset (b) corresponds to Fig. 2a. Drawn by Maxine Anastasi.

century or later (MAR 1993: 75-76; Bruno and Cutajar 2002).

Rumour has it that, closer to the grounds of the Girls Secondary School, several tombs had been discovered during the rock excavations for air-raid shelters during World War II in St Joseph Street, and their contents shared among private individuals. A sad note about such unreported and unrecorded finds, in spite of the intensive scale of rock-cutting and quarrying that took place during the War years, is struck by the Director of the Museum Department in his report for

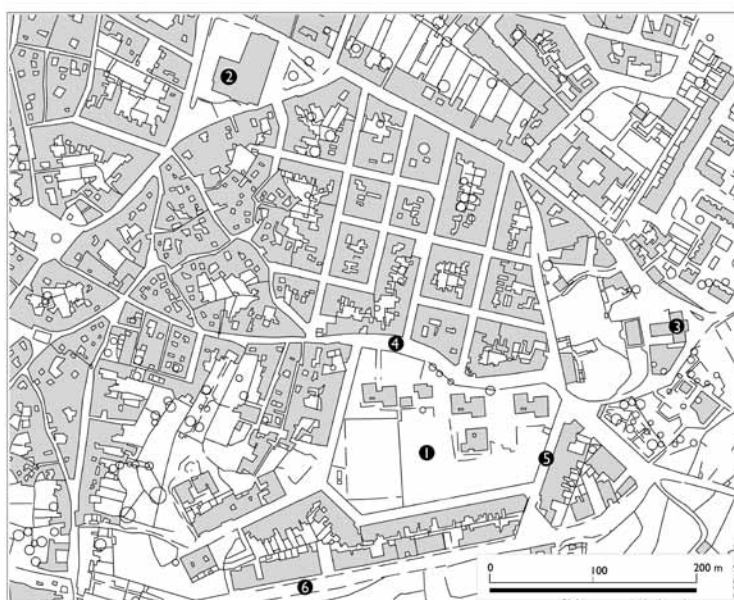
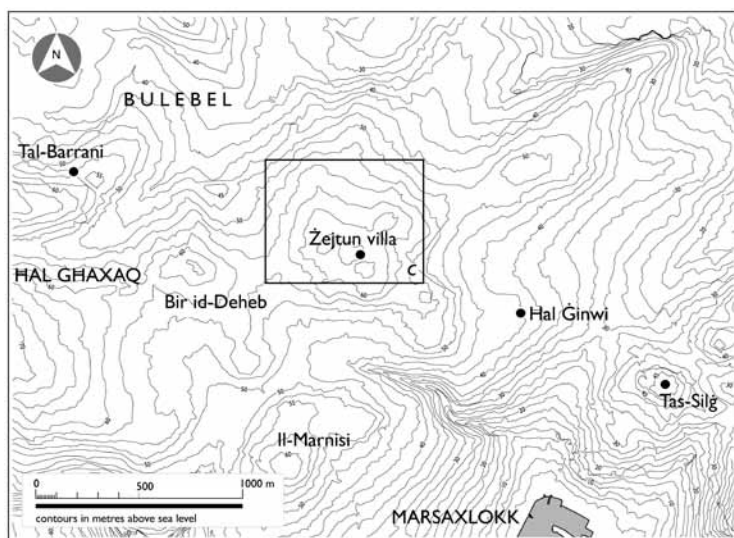


Figure 2. (a) Contour map of Żejtun and environs with inset (c) corresponding to Fig. 2b; (b) location of sites mentioned in the text: 1. Żejtun Roman Villa; 2. Żejtun parish church; 3. Old Żejtun parish church (St Gregor's church); 4. Luqa Briffa Street; 5. Dun Lawrenz Degabriele Street; 6. Anton Buttigieg Street (Żejtun bypass). Drawn by Maxine Anastasi.

1946-47 (Baldacchino 1948). Closer to the site (Fig. 2b), an early Christian tomb, consisting of three chambers around a small ante-chamber entered through a vertical shaft, had been discovered in Strada Giardino Botanico (today Luqa Briffa Street) in 1892 (Caruana 1898: 49, pl. III) and another one in 1919 (Buhagiar 1986: 365-368); a rock-cut tomb was also encountered in the preparation of the parish cemetery, close to St Gregory's Church in 1938 (MAR 1938-39: V-VI) and another one was reported



Figure 3. Francis Mallia surveying remains discovered in 1964 in the grounds of the school, including the channel (middle) and cistern entrance (foreground). The cistern entrance is the same one reproduced in Figure 18. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.

in 1992 to the Museums Department and excavated by Reuben Grima who dutifully produced a detailed report of it (NMA archive). Finally, several tombs are reputed to have been encountered, literally a few metres away from the site, during construction works on the houses lining the opposite side of Dun Lawrenz Degabriele Street. Indeed, on 8 April 1963 such a tomb was discovered and investigated by the Museum Department “in the field immediately to the east of the new village school (M.R. 5825 6785)”. It contained both Punic and Roman material, including a “3rd century lamp, a glass unguentarium...and a large peg-based amphora split to serve as a child's sarcophagus” (MAR 1963: 6, fig. 3).

Discovery and excavation

Everyone who used to live close-by, and was familiar with, the area later occupied by the School states that no signs of the presence of ancient remains were apparent in these fields before 1961, when “traces

of masonry and some pottery came to light” during soil clearance works for the building of a new school for the village (MAR 1961: 5). The Museum Department was then called to investigate but the remains were deemed to be “slight” and no further action was taken. The Annual

Report of the Museum Department for that year does not specify who conducted the “investigation” but Capt. Charles Zammit was then Director and Dr David Trump had his contract as Curator of Archaeology extended for two more years, while Francis S. Mallia, who had

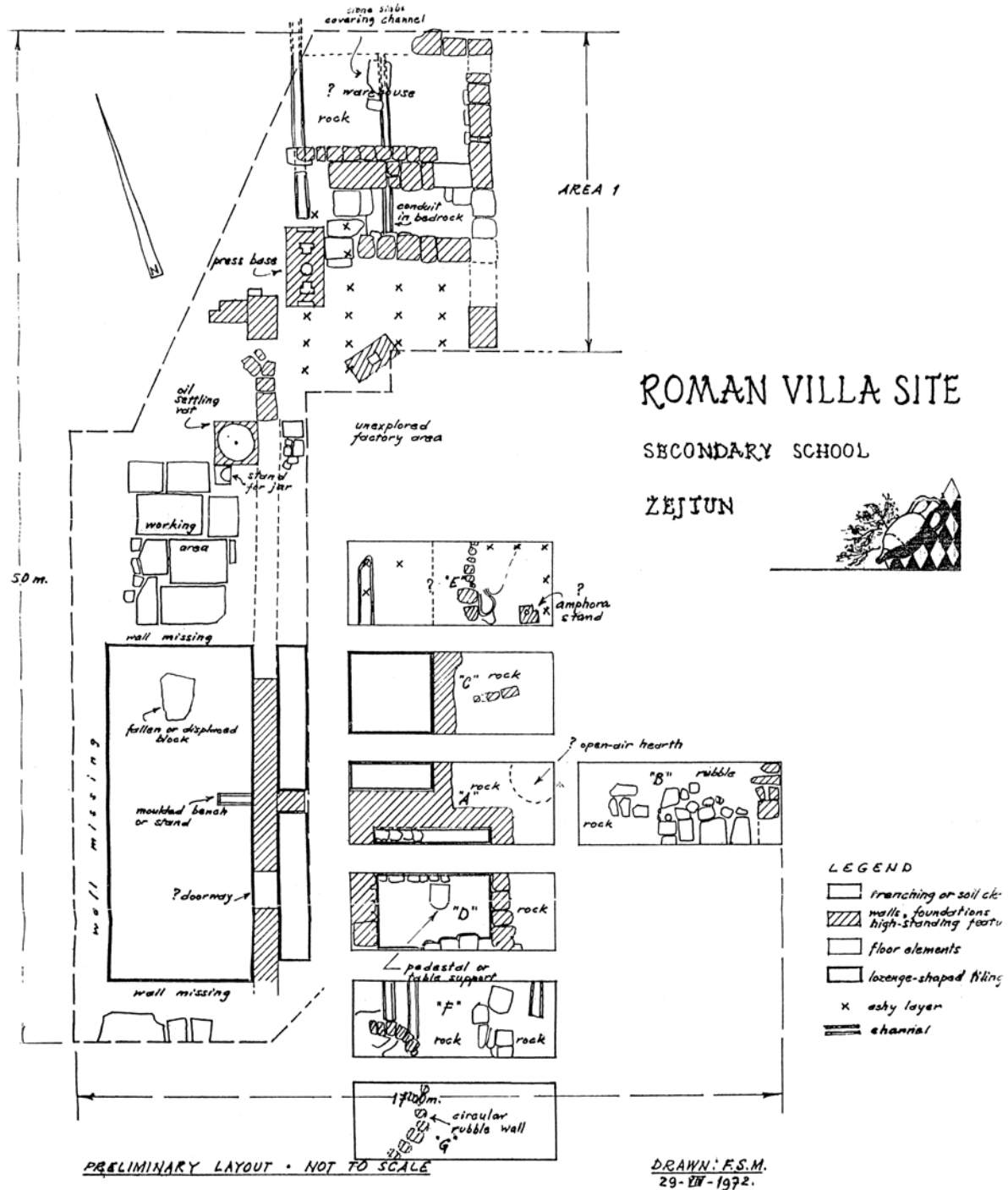


Figure 4. Francis Mallia's sketch plan of the remains uncovered by the end of the 1972 excavation campaign. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.



Figure 5. The laying out of the trenches to be excavated in the 1972 campaign. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.

been appointed Curator of Archaeology in December 1959 “for training under Dr Trump” had started a two-year course for an Academic Diploma in Prehistoric Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology in London in October 1960 and was residing in London at the time (MAR 1961: 1). He returned to Malta in July 1963 “at the end of a three-year course” and took over the curatorship of Archaeology “after November 13, the date on which Dr D.H. Trump completed his five-year contract with Government” (MAR 1963: 2). Since David Trump in a recent exchange of emails categorically excluded any connection with the site, it must have been Captain Zammit who made the said investigation.

The disturbance of more remains was notified to the Museum Department in 1964. This time they were identified as belonging to a “Puno-Roman building” (MAR 1964: 6). Investigations were conducted, presumably by Francis S. Mallia, at intervals between April and July and three distinct features were identified and surveyed (Fig. 3): a large cistern; a line of stone water-channels; and a foundation wall separated from a nearby stone-paved area by a robber trench. But no connection

between the three features was discerned. Already at that stage, the idea of excavating the debris that had accumulated inside the cistern was abandoned because it presented serious danger. No mention of any intervention was made for the years 1965-71. Interest in the site was revived in 1972 when a full-scale excavation, using volunteer assistance of Maltese and Italian students assigned to the task by the Minister of Education and Labour, appears to have cleared the section with the olive-oil pressing apparatus (MAR 1972-73: 72). 1972 happens to be the date of a plan of the remains drawn and signed by Francis S. Mallia (NAM archive) who had succeeded Capt. C.G. Zammit as Director of the Museum on 18 May 1971 (Fig. 4). The plan shows that, apart from the olive pressing area, a system of flat slabs immediately south of the stone vat had already been exposed, as well as the long room paved with lozenge-shaped terracotta tiles, to its south. It also shows that the new technique of excavating by a series of parallel rectangular trenches separated by baulks had already been conceived.

After 1972 excavation campaigns were regularly reported on in the Museum Annual Report up to 1975 (MAR 1973-74: 51; 1974-75: 56; 1975-76: 60). Meanwhile, it seems that the excavation of the site was assigned to Tancred Gouder, the newly appointed Assistant Curator of Archaeology, who extended the orthogonal grid of rectangular trenches, each marked with a letter of the alphabet, separated by 50 cm wide baulks (Fig. 10). The physical work was undertaken under his direction by foreign students following English language courses in summer (Fig. 5). Judging by the labels on the boxes containing the finds from the site currently in storage at Vilhena Palace, the excavation was from 1972 onwards conducted by a succession of spits of 10-20 cm in each trench. Apart from these labels, no field notes or other

documentation have been traced so far.

Some preliminary observations (1975)

On 22 July 1975, after having visited the site, I jotted down some observations in an ‘exercise book’ with a blue cover (copies in file entitled “Żejtun Roman Villa Excavations” in the archive of the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta). The following is an annotated and interpreted summary of those observations:-

The site was clearly a domestic country settlement with a section intended for residence and many heavy stone elements indicating a working area for olive pressing, such as a huge parallelepiped block pierced by various holes and channels intended to support a massive wooden frame which in turn held in place the *prelum* (a horizontal beam that would have exerted pressure on the olive mash contained in an *ad hoc* wicker container) (see reconstructions in Drachmann 1932; White 1970) (Fig. 6a, b). Similar anchor blocks have been encountered in other Roman villa sites in Malta – as well as abroad – such as the one of San Pawl Milqi. A square block hollowed out to form a circular liquid container has parallels in a row of three such vats discovered in the same olive pressing complex of San Pawl Milqi. It is more than likely, therefore, that like them it served the purpose of olive oil decantation. What was missing in the Żejtun complex was the press bed, a flat block with a circular groove to direct the pressed oil towards the decantation vats, a good example of which survived at San Pawl Milqi. A broken part of a rectangular stone platform with a slightly raised border and two circular depressions in the centre was thought at that time to be such a press bed.

On the other hand, the residential area immediately to the south of this industrial complex consisted of at least three rectangular rooms, one of which could be described as a long hall, all

paved with lozenge-shaped tiles. The laying of differently coloured tiles here formed a herring-bone pattern, unlike the cascading cubes pattern produced by similarly shaped terracotta tiles in one room of the Roman villa discovered at L-Iklin in 1975 (MAR 1975-76: 60; Bonanno 1981) and by marble tiles at the Roman domus in Rabat.

These rooms were enclosed by walls that were plastered and decorated with simple line paintings in red, yellow and green, traces of which survived. In the north squarish room to the east of the large tiled room I had noticed that some traces of painted plaster were covered over



Figure 6. (a) Elevated view from the South of the “industrial area” showing slab with cupped recesses (foreground) and anchor block (top left); (b) Elevated view from the North of the same area showing oil settling vat (right) and “residential quarters” in the background. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2007.

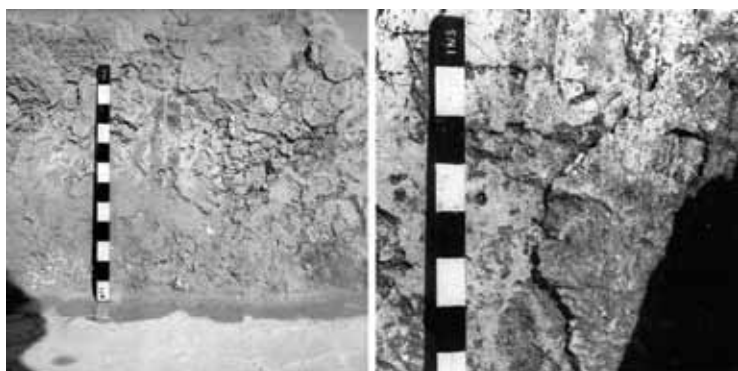


Figure 7. (left) Painted vertical bands on plaster; (right) traces of additional layer of plaster on top of the painted one. Photograph: Anthony Bonanno, 1976.

by another layer of plaster. Near the east corner of the south wall (Fig. 7a) dark red vertical parallel lines were observed, as well as possibly curved yellow traits to their right. Towards the centre (Fig. 7b), I could see two thicker, dark red, vertical lines, a dark blue line curving down to the left and beyond it, to the left, a large area painted in light green. To the right was yet another very thick, vertical dark red line. Several parts of this painted surface were covered by a layer of plaster. More dark red, vertical lines were seen on the left of the south wall, while closer to the left corner further traces of light green areas, dark green lines and small yellow patches could still be seen. I interpreted these as imitation marble inside panels. I also saw other traces of colour on the north wall where it was clear that the painted plaster belonged to the same period as the tiled floor. I ended my observations by suggesting that samples of the plaster should be extracted for chemical analysis.

On the basis of this type of wall painting (*ad incrostazione marmorea*, that is, in imitation marble) and similarities to the wall paintings found at San Pawl Milqi (Bozzi 1968: 68-72, pls 44-49), I believed that the first Roman structure might have dated to the 1st century AD, though I reserved judgement for after an analysis of the associated ceramic material. Since Tancred Gouder (verbal communication) dated the villa complex to the 3rd-4th centuries AD on the basis of the ceramic

material found in the previous excavation campaigns (which I had not seen) and of a small coin hoard he had discovered in one of the rooms (retraced in Malta Central Bank deposit), I assumed that the villa could have been built in early imperial times and was reused, or continued to be in use in late Roman times. Evidence for this re-use came not only from the layer of plaster mentioned above, but also from a number of architectural elements that were not found in their original context, like the plain base of an engaged column, a four-sided plinth topped by a moulding (see Cardona 2010: cat. no. F258), and various other ashlar blocks which did not fit in the original construction pattern.

Another observation that I made in 1975 regarded the elevation of the walls of the tiled rooms. I came to the conclusion that in one or another of the building stages, the walls consisted of regular ashlar blocks only up to the height of the first course above the floor, the rest above that being constructed of mud brick. I had come across such a technique during my participation in the excavation of a section of ancient Berenice in Benghazi in 1972 and 1973. In one area a whole section of a collapsed mud brick wall, about 2 x 1.5 m, was discovered in perfect condition lying on its side (Sear 1977: 255-287, fig. 71, pl. 31, a-b). In Żejtun a few traces of disintegrated mud bricks could be noted at that time in the east wall of the same painted and tiled room mentioned above, behind a projecting section of the painted plaster which was not supported by a stone wall. Since crudely fired bricks had also been found on the site, it appeared that this building technique was also in use.

Neither Francis Mallia nor Tancred Gouder had identified evidence of an earlier building belonging to the Punic age, but they had identified some Bronze Age occupation indicated by “two rock-cut silos containing sherds of the Borg in-Nadur Phase” cut in the very soft bed-

rock on the south side of the area (MAR 1973-1974: 51).

The 1976 excavations

It was in the summer of 1976 that I directed two one-week campaigns, one in July (5-11) and one in September (3-14) 1976, in connection with two Summer Schools in Archaeology organized by the National Student Travel Service (NSTS), Malta (MAR 1976-77: 64). Again the physical work was done by students, foreign and local, but they had attended a theoretical course in archaeology. Work was continued on two more days on 16 and 23 October. The same method of excavation of layers by spits was used, but following changes in the composition of the layers whenever possible.

The following are some highlights from a report submitted to Tancred Gouder, the Curator of Archaeology, on the two summer excavation campaigns of 1976 (copies in file entitled “Żejtun Roman Villa Excavations” in the archive of the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta):

In the previous summer excavation in Trench T had already been taken down to a depth of c. 54 cm on the east side of a north-south oriented ashlar wall, and down to a depth of c. 47 cm on its west side. For this reason excavation in this trench was resumed in two separate sections: one to the east and the other to the west of the wall. Perhaps the most important find from this excavation was that of two fragments of a cooking pot, one of which carried an inscription in Punic characters which, by comparison with others found at Tas-Silġ (for example, Cagiano de Azevedo *et al.* 1973: pl. 59,1), was read as a dedication to Ashtart. The same reading was confirmed first by Tancred Gouder and, eventually, by Benedetto Rocco who was on a short visit to the island. A further, more in-depth study of the inscription, proposed the identification of



Figure 8. A dedicatory inscription in Punic discovered in Trench T in 1976. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2012.

another possible female divinity, namely Anat, instead of, or in addition to, Ashtart (Frendo 1999) (Fig. 8).

These fragments were found after removing a 15 cm-thick spit from a square sample of hardened earth (not torba) that had been left unexcavated in the east section of the trench. Along with them a good number of pottery sherds were unearthed, including several large fragments of coarse hand-made pottery which at the time was thought to be Bronze Age. The exact position of the inscribed sherd was recorded in relation to the edges of the south and east baulks.

In the September campaign the rest of the east section of Trench T was excavated to a depth of about 1 m. The matrix consisted of “the usual mixture of shapeless stones of all sizes, soil, and some particles of very white friable rock (like gypsum) which forms the characteristic bedrock of the area”. Here, half of a flat red plate (c. 15 cm in diameter) was found, together with more hand-made (impasto) pottery which by now I suspected to be Punic coarse cooking ware rather than Bronze Age. One small fragment of a black gloss vessel was also recorded.

In the west section excavation was resumed in September starting from a depth of 47



Figure 9. Elevated view from the South of Trench U re-investigated in 2012.

Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2012.

cm. A second level, starting from a depth of 53cm down to 106 cm, produced a thick concentration of ceramic material, including lozenge-shaped tiles and part of the rim and handle of a skyphos, or kylix, with a dark red band on the inside, and three small fragments of Italian terra sigillata. It also produced a lot of friable hand-made pottery, including two fragments of a coarse cooking pot with an internal flange on the rim and what looked like fragments of a kiln wall with soot on the smooth side. A cylindrical-shaped object of coarse fabric, c. 7 cm high looked like a pestle or pounder. At the bottom of the level a large group of sea-shells was found.

In Trench J, situated immediately to the south of the rock-cut “silo pit”, some surface cleaning on the east side of a water channel brought to light a number of sherds of late Roman corrugated ware, together with two fragments of terra sigillata, one probably North African, the other Italian. Among other shapeless stones a fragment of a squared block was found (15x10x20 cm) with an engraved rectilinear decoration in one corner. Later on, in the east half of the trench a bronze nail with a square section turned up c. 50 cm down while a small fragment of Italian terra sigillata was retrieved c. 36 cm down. The material included some fragments of wall plaster with a thin coat of red paint.

From just above bedrock in the west half came a fragment of a shallow bowl covered with a bright red slip and decorated with a thick dark band on the inside, below the rim, and three thin bands on the outside. The top of an ashlar wall in a west-east orientation was revealed, interrupted by a stone channel sloping down into the south baulk.

The same channel appeared coming out of the north baulk in Trench U which was located immediately to the south of Trench J (Figs 9, 10). Here some sherds came to light, the majority belonging to large and thick-walled vessels, but a few Roman sherds, a small piece of glass and five fragments of lozenge-shaped terracotta tiles were also unearthed. Trench U was excavated down to bedrock.

Trench V, which was located immediately to the east of Trench J and south of Trench T. Only the east half of it was opened and excavated to a depth of c. 33 cm. The upper layer, about 20 cm thick produced both ancient and modern pottery, including two fragments of terra sigillata and one of corrugated ware. A wall of small stones with a west-east orientation was encountered but it turned out to be only one course high and lying on loose earth. South of it, about 44 cm deep, three fragments of a curved lead sheet were retrieved.

General observations (2012)

I believe that the most important observations resulting from these two short campaigns are the following:

- a) Beyond the upper layer of top soil which contained ancient material mixed with modern stuff, undisturbed layers were encountered which contained uncontaminated pottery associated with walls, probably foundation ones, and features like stone water channels.
- b) Evidence of a much earlier activity in Punic times was suggested by finds of early ceramic fragments like the fragment of an imitation kylix and a

black gloss sherd, possibly Attic.

- c) The most intensive use in Roman imperial times (previously suggested in the residential section by the painted walls and paved floors) was confirmed by the presence of several terra sigillata fragments, both Italian and North African.
- d) Of interest was the high percentage of fragments of very friable impasto ware, some of which clearly belonged to cooking pots and dishes, while thicker ones, with soot on their smooth surfaces, might have belonged to oven linings.

Present situation (2012)

Up to this point in time, nothing available in print on these excavations, apart from my short article in *School Magazine* (Bonanno 1987) and Anthony Frendo's article on the inscribed sherd mentioned above (Frendo 1999). But some study and research activity has been undertaken since the setting up of the Department of Classics and Archaeology in 1988, the unpublished documentation from which is available in a file housed in the archive of the same department.

As part of a course assignment, in September 1995 I instructed archaeology student Keith Buhagiar to draw up a plan of the surviving visible features and the layout of trenches of the site. In 2000 I made available to archaeology student Josef M. Briffa the same plan and all my notes and photographs of the site in order to draw up from them a detailed systematic and comprehensible description of the remains, sorting out the trenches by their respective letters and reconstructing a tentative stratigraphy (Bonanno and Briffa 2000). In 2002 I invited Dr Claudia Sagona to catalogue the pottery from my excavation campaigns for which she produced two volumes of drawings with accompanying catalogue (Sagona 2002). More recently, in 2006, I have also undertaken an



Figure 10. Aerial photographs showing main features discovered on the site (top) and the location of the Trenches explored in the 1970s and the Areas being investigated by the University of Malta. The Trenches have been relocated by Maxine Anastasi who also annotated the photographs being reproduced by courtesy of the Armed Forces of Malta.

overview of all the material retrieved from the 1970s excavations stored in Vilhena Palace, including sculpture, architectural pieces and pottery (file entitled "Żejtun Roman Villa Excavations" in the archive of the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta). David Cardona has just included all the architectural decorative features from the old excavations and from the recent ones (2006 to 2009 and 2011) in a comprehensive catalogue of all such items in Maltese collections as part of his Masters dissertation (Cardona 2010: cat. nos F110-112, F117-118, F123-128, F259, F360-361). Last but not least,

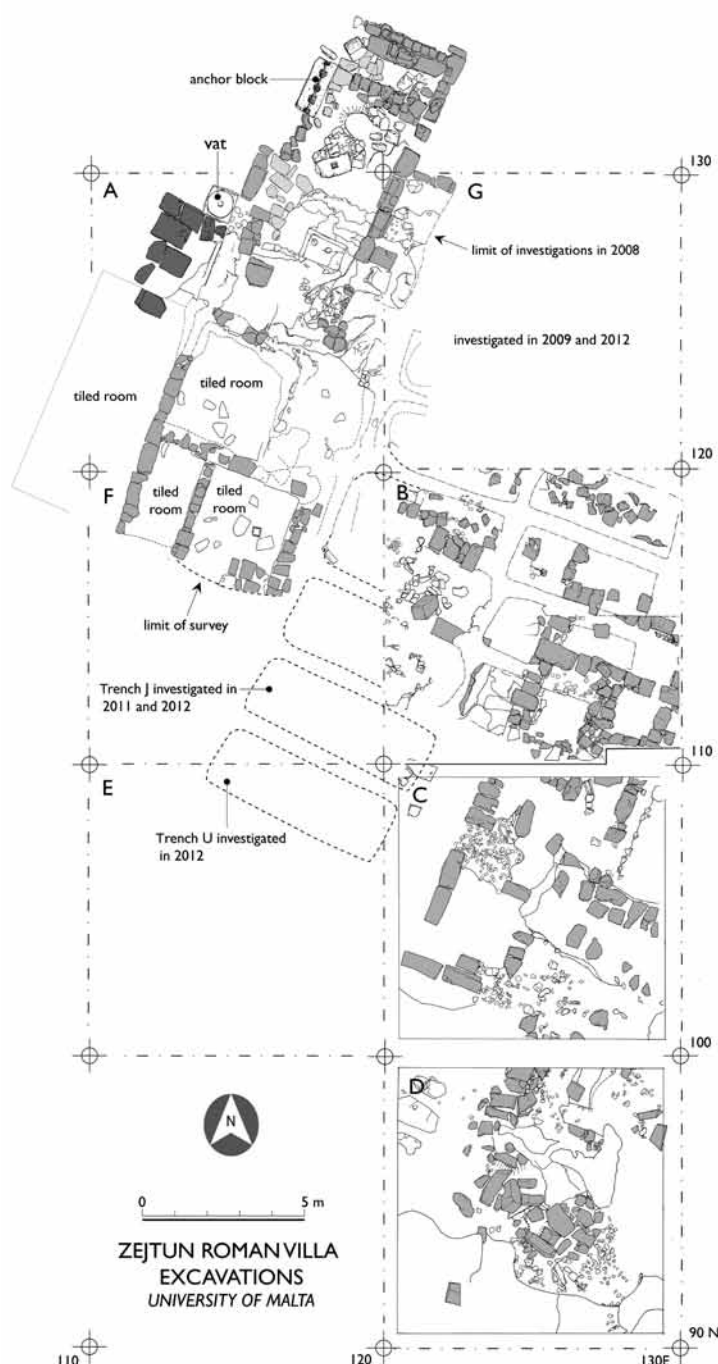


Figure 11. The Żejtun Roman Villa: site plan. Areas A, B, C and D are reproduced as they appeared at the end of the 2008 excavation campaign. Drawn by Renata Zerafa and Maxine Anastasi.

Maxine Anastasi has already included an examination of the pottery from the Żejtun Villa excavations of 1972 in her Masters dissertation (Anastasi 2011; Anastasi, this volume) and is in the process of studying in detail the ceramic material from the current ones as part of her D.Phil research programme in Oxford.

Further insights into the history of the site, such as site formation, as gleaned from the field work conducted on these four trenches, should be gained from the amalgamation of post-excavation analysis of the material retrieved from the same trenches with that from the rest of the site.

The last and most important step in this process of recovering as much knowledge on this site as possible are the full-scale excavations currently being conducted by the Department of Classics and Archaeology. An account of these is given by Dr Nicholas Vella in the second part of this paper.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA EXCAVATION PROJECT: 2006- 2009, 2011-2012 [NCV]

In 2006 the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta embarked on a research excavation project at the Żejtun Roman Villa following requests from successive school heads and the Żejtun Local Council. The on-going archaeological investigations are intended to assess and record the remains uncovered in 1964 and in the 1970s and other data arising from new excavations at the site. In addition, the fieldwork provides undergraduate students reading for a degree in Archaeology at the University of Malta with the practical skills related specifically to excavation, including on-site recording. In agreement with the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage, five areas were chosen for investigation. Areas were aligned along a 10 x 10 m grid laid out on site by a team of surveyors from the Malta Environment and Planning Authority who also set up a site benchmark (63.51 m above mean sea level) (Figs 10, 11). To date, short excavation campaigns have been held each year between 2006 and 2009 and again in 2011 and in 2012 under the co-directorship of the authors of this paper.

The method of excavation used in the project is a stratigraphic one, where each unit of stratification (termed a Stratigraphic Unit) is identified and recorded as part of a stratigraphic sequence. The methods of digging and recording follow those that have been used by the Department on other projects, namely at Tas-Silġ (see Vella *et al.*: forthcoming) and at Għar ix-Xiġ on Gozo, and are in line with the requirements of the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage. A site code – ZTN06 – was designated by this office for use throughout the duration of the project for all recording purposes.

In all areas investigated particular attention was given to defining the extent of past interventions, both horizontally (defining the limits of the rectangular trenches) and vertically (determining the depth of previous interventions). Remains of plastic wrappers, tin cans, glass bottles, school uniform buttons, and plastic footwear were encountered in several places, a clear indicator the rubbish that accumulated in the trenches after the previous excavations came to an end in 1976.

A brief overview of the remains encountered in each Area now follows. In several instances, no dating can as yet be given to archaeological features because the pottery and other objects recovered are still being studied.

Area A/Area G (110E/120N – 120E/130N)

Area supervisors: Maxine Anastasi (2008-2009), Dennis Mizzi (2006, 2012), Renata Zerafa (2007)

These two contiguous areas had already been explored in the campaigns in the 1970s. Luckily, a few shallow baulks, belonging to several trenches (C, E, O and possibly M and Q), still survived to allow the University team to attempt a recovery of the archaeological evidence making up the physical link between the so-called “industrial area” (or “factory



Figure 12 View of Area A from the North showing baulks left at the end of the 1970s excavations. The slab with cupped recesses was re-discovered in 2006. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2006.



Figure 13 A second slab with a cupped recess discovered below the so-called “working area” in Area A. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2009.

area” in Mallia’s 1972 sketch plan) and the structural remains to the south-east (Fig. 12). Our investigations revealed the extent of the room where the beam-anchoring device (or anchor block, measuring 3.6 x 1.56 x 0.76 m) is situated (in Area A), uncovered the large 1.56 x 0.92 m slab with shallow cup-like depressions (diam. 0.20 m) that had been identified in the 1970s, and excavated one baulk which was found to contain a number of fired bricks and small fragments of worked marble. An important discovery was made in the area contiguous to the stone vat, presumably meant for the decantation of olive oil,



Figure 14. Elevated view from the East of Area B with orthogonal walls in part explored already in the 1970s. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2009.



Figure 15. Elevated view from the North-East of the "silo pit" in Area C discovered in the 1970s. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2011.

where excavations below the "working area" of Mallia's 1972 sketch plan revealed a large damaged stone slab (2.20 x 1.10 m) with another cup-like depression; it had clearly gone out of use when it was covered over (Fig. 13). The function of these slabs with cup-like depressions does not find parallels in the standard literature on Mediterranean olive-pressing installations from antiquity (e.g. White 1970, Frankel 1999). At the San Pawl Milqi villa site, however, similar floor slabs (one with a cup-like depression) are known, one adjacent to the other and surrounded on three sides by slabs of stone placed vertically and covered, in part, by successive layers of

hydraulic mortar (Scrinari 1964: 128, fig. 18, pls 53, 48). They have been associated by Locatelli with the remains of tanks used for the collection of oil in Period VI of the villa's history, dated to the second quarter of the 3rd century AD and the beginning of the 4th century AD (Locatelli 2005-2006: fig. 3; 2008: 1353; 2009). A similar function for our slabs is certainly possible; indeed, the large slabs identified in Mallia's sketch plan with a "working area" could have been used to line the tank on its four sides. Beyond the threshold to the room with the anchor block, to the east (in Area G), limited traces of a floor surface were excavated much damaged by earlier attempts to excavate down to bedrock. Further south, more traces of a shallow floor levelling fill were traced, lying directly over bedrock; the actual floor survived in small friable patches of what appears to be lime-based plaster. The extent of the spaces here still has to be investigated, especially eastwards beyond a substantial wall (an area largely covered by modern construction waste) and southwards (where the bedrock dips suddenly), and their relationship to a system of water channels and a well immediately to the north properly understood.

Area B (120E/110N – 130E/120N)

Area supervisor: Rebecca Farrugia (all campaigns)

This area incorporates several trenches that had been explored in the 1970s, certainly parts of trenches K, T and B, possibly also L, S, R and Q. As a result of this, much effort was spent drawing the limits of the old trenches and any visible features, and defining the extent of previous digging which, in several instances, had clearly not gone down to bedrock. A series of orthogonal walls covers much of the area explored to date (Fig. 14), running southwards from Area G, where a clear drop in the level of the bedrock surface has been ascertained. The walls are of two types: the first consists of walls between 0.60 and 0.80 m wide,

constructed of masonry in dry rubble of different sizes for a height of about 1 m, often set on wider stone footings; the second type is in two courses of ashlar masonry or, rather, what appears to be an opportunistic exploitation of hewn stone blocks, about 0.58 m wide, often laid horizontally using small rubble stones and a matrix of soil. Stone walls of both types were placed in construction trenches cut in the soft bedrock. The walls of the first type are orthogonal to each other but the intervening spaces were found to contain only fill deposits. In other words, no floor levels were identified; indeed, it seems that the Punic inscription invoking Ashtart (or Anat-Ashtart), mentioned above, came from one such deposit (in Trench T). It is likely that these walls served as foundations for a construction that no longer survives, similar to a system that has been identified at other Roman villa sites in Malta, where sloping ground was levelled out using *caisson*-type foundation structures to create a *basis villae* (cf. Locatelli 2005–2006: 270). To date, it has been possible to assign one of the foundation walls to a period post-dating the 4th century BC on the basis of some diagnostic pottery sherds recovered from the construction fills, in particular a fragment of an Attic black gloss cup and a fragment of a squat lekythos kindly dated for us by Babette Bechtold and Winfred van de Put from the Belgo-Maltese Survey Project (Bechtold 2008; pers. comm. W. van de Put, 5 October 2008). The wall of the second type, found to have been built around a rock-cut pit, 1.50 m in diameter and already explored in 1973 in Trench K (Fig. 15), is still undated, but again, the floor level associated with its use is lost. It is possible that this rock-cut pit, and traces of a second one found nearby (possibly Trench L), are the two Bronze Age “silo pits” identified in 1973. The amount of residual pottery of the Borg in-Nadur phase recovered by the University team in different parts of Area B lends support to this idea although it is likely that the pits



Figure 16. (a) Elevated view from the South of the press bed built into a wall in a spot that lies between Areas C and E; (b) detail of the press bed, from the East. Photographs: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2012.

went through successive phases of use as suggested by a number of rock-cut linear channels (about 0.35 m wide) which are linked to them. Another circular cut in bedrock, identified in 2012, might be a third pit. This awaits exploration.

Area C (120E/100N – 130E/110N)

Area supervisors: Maxine Anastasi (2011, 2012), Luisana D'Amato (2009), Mevrick Spiteri (2008), Clive Vella (2006–2007)

After the initial delineation of disturbance and archaeological investigation (from 1964) were defined in 2006 and 2007, excavation here revealed the continuation of some of the walls uncovered in Area B and many more structural remains. The stratigraphic relationship of these walls is still being worked out but it is clear that the earliest activity goes back to Punic



Figure 17. Elevated view from the East of wall remains and a covered drain in Area C. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2009.



Figure 18. The (western) entrance to the cistern when it was explored in 1964. Photograph reproduced by courtesy of the National Museum of Archaeology/Heritage Malta.



Figure 19. Elevated view from the South of the two cistern openings in Area D. Also visible are the linear trenches cut into bedrock (behind and above human scale). Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2009.

times as ascertained by much pottery, some broken in situ. A large wall that is stratigraphically later runs from one end of the old Trench U (in the adjacent Area E) to the eastern limit of Area C. Built into this wall was a press bed, made of Globigerina Limestone (Fig. 16). The slab is rectangular with a triangular projection at one end. The overall length of the stone block is 0.88 m, it is 0.45 m wide and 0.18 m thick. The top surface consists of an oval groove which joins a splaying spout or runnel; the pitted surface in the area defined by the groove, where the olive pulp would have been placed, suggests that the press bed must have been used in antiquity. The underside of the slab has a shallow socket, presumably intended to receive a projection that would have kept the bed in place during pressing. Press beds of this sort are very common in Roman and Byzantine Cyprus (Hadjisavvas 1992: 54–59). Other walls in the area are stratigraphically later than the large wall just described, and one room survives. The surviving walls are built in ashlar masonry, about 0.54 m wide, and the floor preparation contained much painted plaster fragments. The channel explored by Mallia in 1964 (and just visible in Fig. 3), which is no longer extant, was linked to what appears to be an external corner of this room. Other stone channels were, however, found, starting from higher levels in Area B and sloping southwards; one channel in particular still has the original capping stones in place (Fig. 17).

Area D (120E/90N – 130E/100N)

Area supervisors: Dennis Mizzi (2011), Renata Zerafa (2009), Mevrick Spiteri (2006–2008)

When the excavations in this area, not far from the school boundary wall along Dun Ġwann Tabone Street, started in 2006 it became clear that the feature of stone blocks in the middle corresponded to what Mallia had identified in 1964 with the “large cistern” (Fig. 18). Two openings (or cistern heads) were identified when



Figure 20. Elevated view from the West of the covered drain seen to be heading in the direction of the cistern opening, still blocked with a large stone. To its right is the linear trench cut into bedrock. Photograph: Department of Classics and Archaeology, University of Malta, 2008.

large ashlar blocks that had been wedged there to block entry were removed, in one case using a crane (Fig. 19). The western opening was investigated first, and modern deposit removed to a depth of about 1.5 m to reveal the cylindrical rock-cut wall of the cistern, in parts lined with mortar. Excavation here and also in the eastern opening had to be abandoned when it was realized that the interlocking stone blocks forming the head were unstable and that the rock face of the cistern itself was, in parts, crumbling. Excavation can only proceed when the stone arrangement is made safe by being suspended from an apposite metal scaffold or similar structure. As a result of the decision not to proceed with the excavation of the cistern, it is impossible to decide what shape the underground water storage area would have had. Attempts to see what lay below topsoil immediately to the west of the cistern head using a ground-penetrating radar by Lieven Verdonck in 2008 (as part of the Belgo-Maltese Survey Project) did

not reveal much in this regard (Verdonck 2008). Proof, however, that the feature was intended to store water runoff came when a drain was revealed by excavation running down in the direction of the cistern from higher ground in a north-west–south-east direction. The drain was made of a series of stone channels or gutters, about 0.26 m wide, placed in a line, each covered with stones kept in place with mortar. It was found lying at the bottom of a linear trench cut into the soft bedrock (Fig. 20). Another three rock-cut channels, parallel to the first and each 0.30 m wide, were also discovered but these did not contain anything. They may have been intended to carry similar gutters but the fact that one nearest to the western cistern entrance was dug short of it, whereas others clearly headed away from it, could mean that they are unrelated features, possibly of an earlier date, of which one was re-used to accommodate the drain. A preliminary study of some pottery recovered from the construction

fill of the cistern head, carried out by Bechtold in 2008, suggests that the cistern was in place already in the 4th century BC (the Punic period) (Bechtold 2008: 4).

Careful, stratigraphic excavations are allowing the team from the University of Malta to piece together the complex history of what is clearly a multi-period site. That this is so was already apparent in the 1970s and is confirmed from the recent study of the pottery recovered in the 1972 excavation season (Anastasi, this volume). The present work will allow us to unravel the story in as much detail as possible and begin to understand the site in the context of other archaeological sites in this part of Malta (cf. Grima and Mallia 2011; Cutajar, this volume). To that end, the excavations continue.

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ABBREVIATION

MAR Museum Annual Reports [Annual Report of the Museums Department]

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